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ABSTRACT

In Boston a number of factors contributed to the prolonged community resistance to school desegregation and busing to achieve it. First, for ten years prior to 1974, Boston residents had been assured that their children had a right to attend neighborhood schools and that this right would never be abridged. Thus, the court order to utilize bus transportation in desegregation constituted a "disruption of expectations," a phenomenon which social scientists say is a cause of participation in social movements. Second, the anti integration movement in Boston had a strong organizational base. Politicians involved had extensive support networks and resources, including office space, phones, and personnel provided by the City Council. A third factor was the assignation of responsibility for the desegregation problem and its resolution to supra city institutions, especially the Federal government. These three factors interacted to encourage white parents to believe that the schools had not been intentionally segregated, that the court order would be rescinded because of its unfairness, and that the cause of restoring constitutional rights to whites would be successful. The absence of a significant white pro integration movement was a fourth factor in the resistance. Finally, a climate of tolerance for the anti integration movement's activities existed in the city, with public elected officials, police and other law enforcement agencies failing to support desegregation. (Author/GC)

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Toward Understanding the
Persistence of Opposition to School
Desegregation in Boston

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This paper identifies some of the factors which have contributed to the persistence of the anti-"busing" movement in Boston. We examine, especially, the availability and mobilization of resources by the competing forces.

Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity ordered that Boston's public schools be desegregated in September of 1974. For two years thereafter, a wide variety of anti-desegregation activities were undertaken routinely and forcefully by large numbers of people. There has been a steady diminution of these activities, but the resistance in Boston lasted longer than in other Northern cities. For theoretical and practical reasons, it is important to ask why. Five major features of the Boston situation are outlined.

First, for over ten years prior to the court order, residents of the city were repeatedly assured that children had a right to attend neighborhood schools and that this right would never be abridged. White residents saw no reason to believe otherwise. All attempts to integrate the public schools failed. For ten years, whites were conditioned to believe that the social order would not change.

A number of social scientists have argued that participation in social movements may stem from disruption of expectations. Davies (1969), for example, contends that revolutions are more likely to occur when a long period of economic and/or social advancement is followed by an abrupt reversal of this trend. Gurr (1970) articulated three types of relative deprivation that may act as the source of discontent he sees as a prerequisite to social movement formation: constant expectations with respect to some goal or value and declining ability to attain it; rising expectations and constant ability; and declining ability concurrent with rising expectations. The Boston case seems to fall within the first category, constant expectations and declining

ability. Breton and Breton (1969), who employ an economic model, argue that demand for a social movement comes from those who must make the greatest readjustment of expectations after a disjunction between old and new expectations has occurred. All of these authors, at least implicitly, suggest that disruption of expectations makes people available for social movement participation.

In Boston, there is no doubt that most white people expected the school system to continue to function without interference by nonlocal agents. Local politicians seemed very successful at keeping change in abeyance. Louise Day Hicks, elected to the Boston School Committee as a reform candidate in the early 1960's, soon found that racial politics would get her more votes than would reform politics. She led the School Committee, in the midst of the civil rights' movement, into taking a position that Boston's schools were not even de facto segregated. For a decade, she and her many emulators assured their constituents that integration would never be forced on the people of Boston and, for a decade, they appeared to be right. Efforts by the state and federal governments to achieve some integration in Boston's schools failed. In 1965, Massachusetts passed the Racial Imbalance Act which required Boston to balance some schools in terms of race. The law was never implemented as originally enacted. Public hearings were held annually to gather testimony on whether the law should be repealed. The publicity attendant to these hearings gave the very strong impression that the law would never be put into effect. The State Board of Education, charged with overseeing implementation of the law, seemed singularly ineffective. Even when HEW withheld federal education funds to pressure compliance with the law, the Boston School Committee did not bend and the schools remained segregated.

The mass media, which could have provided a counterpoint to reality as defined by the politicians, instead were purveyors of incorrect or ambiguous

information. The differences between de facto and de jure segregation, between integration and desegregation, between state and federal legal actions were frequently confused by the media. When, in 1972, the NAACP and a group of black parents filed suit in federal district court arguing that Boston was guilty of running a de jure segregated school system, news reporters largely ignored the case and its implications. Even in 1974, when the annual hearings were conducted on repealing the state's Racial Imbalance Act, only one news account pointed out that repeal would be futile if the federal court found Boston guilty of running a dual school system. On June 21, 1974, the day the federal court made its decision, the news media inadequately described the legal realities. There was little attempt to explain that Boston was in exactly the same legal position as had been the Southern school districts, which had been compelled to desegregate their schools years before. De jure and de facto segregation were still not clearly delineated by the media. Politicians promised to appeal the decision and assured residents that a legal error had been made by the court. The rhetoric was still "Never" and education of the public by the media was thoroughly inadequate. There was little reason, even after the Garrity decision, for white parents to believe that the schools would really be desegregated three months later.

The second factor contributing to the persistence of the resistance was the strong organizational base of the movement. The politicians involved had extensive support networks. Many had been involved in Boston politics for a considerable length of time and had put many citizens, institutions and other politicians in their debt. Mrs. Hicks, in particular, controlled a vast patronage system, partly because she had been in politics so long, and partly because she had occupied so many offices, each with its own reward

network. She also exercised considerable power within the Mayor's circle of influence.

The City Council provided a variety of resources for the protest movement. It made available to the movement office space, telephones, supplies and personnel. Mrs. Hicks' administrative assistant in the Council was also the chairperson of the anti-"busing" organization ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) which was formed to combat and disrupt desegregation and to overturn the court order. ROAR's meetings were held in Council chambers every Wednesday night for two years. A large ROAR sign was prominently displayed from City Council windows in the city hall.

Approximately half of ROAR's executive board members were also leaders in the Boston Home and School Association, the city's analogue of the PTA. The Home and School Association is not an independent entity. Its offices are provided by the School Committee and in its charter is a provision forbidding criticism of the Committee. ROAR was able to exploit the resources of this group. Notices about protest meetings and other resistance actions were sent home with school children under the auspices of the Home and School Association. The Association was in a position to learn about disruptions in desegregated schools and this information was quickly put into ROAR's hands. ROAR would then often organize a demonstration at the trouble spot or arrange for sympathy demonstrations or walkouts at other schools.

The School Department ran an information center which was supposed to provide correct and objective information to parents and to quell rumors before they became unrecognizable from the truth. One of the information center's key staffers was also a South Boston executive board member of ROAR. She freely provided ROAR with information about school related incidents and statistics which would then be incorporated into the group's propaganda.

Other ROAR leaders and their relatives were also on the information center's payroll.

These organizational ties provided ROAR with substantial resources in the form of workers, information, supplies and space, without which the group would have had a much more difficult time mobilizing support.

The manner in which the protest leaders couched their opposition to desegregation made support of the court order very difficult. The nature of this rhetoric comprises the third variable contributing to the persistence of the protest movement.

In the South, resistance to desegregation was frequently justified using Confederate symbols such as the Confederate flag and "Dixie". Ideological support came from states' rights and white supremacy arguments. The Supreme Court was viewed as flawed and in error. In Boston, in contrast, the very American symbols of the Stars and Stripes, patriotic songs and the Constitution were appropriated by resistance leaders. The ideological arsenal was filled with themes of civil liberties, Fourteenth Amendment rights and abrogation thereof, due process of law, and safety of children. These are the very arguments used as a legal basis for school desegregation and were used in the South by supporters of that policy. The ideology of the anti-"busing" movement in Boston was effective in at least two ways. It deprived supporters of desegregation of their usual ideology and boxed them in to defending desegregation almost solely on the basis of obedience to the law. It also tied the movement to respectable conservative positions and largely prevented the movement from being attacked as racist.

Three major themes emerged in the anti-"busing" ideology. The court order was continually characterized as doomed. The rhetoric gave every indication that the decision would be reversed by some higher court. The

second characteristic of the ideology was its tone of moral outrage. "Forced busing is wrong" read the bumper stickers. In one neighborhood newspaper, the court order was seldom referred to except as "Garrity's tyrannical edict". Overtly racist slogans or statements were shunned. When white supremacy advocates came to Boston from Virginia, the anti-"busing" group picketed their headquarters.

A third theme of the resistance ideology was the assignation of responsibility for the problem and its resolution to supra-city institutions, especially the federal government. Even people not supporting the resistance, such as the Mayor, played on this theme. All of the elected officials involved in the protest movement repeatedly stressed that they were not responsible for the court order and would take no action to assist in its implementation. It was a federal court order and the federal government must take responsibility. There was no acknowledgment of Boston's legal culpability, no recognition of legal liability for effecting a remedy. Connected with this view of nonlocal responsibility was the targeting as enemies not blacks, but suburban liberals, "social engineers" and rich people. Demonstrations were directed at Ted Kennedy, presidents of corporations that even indirectly supported desegregation, Judge Garrity and others of that civic stature.

These three ideological themes interacted to produce a situation wherein white parents were encouraged to believe that the schools had not been intentionally segregated or even segregated at all, that the court order would be rescinded or overturned because of its obvious unfairness, and that the noble cause of restoring constitutional rights to whites would be successful.

The fourth reason we will examine in order to understand the persistence of the protest movement is the absence of a significant white pro-desegregation group. As Jackson et al. (1960) point out, an essential ingredient for the

success of a protest movement is the participation of already recognized leaders in the new cause. In Boston, virtually the entire white political structure of the city participated in the opposition movement. There were no outspoken white pro-desegregation leaders who had credibility among white residents of the city. The Progressive Labor Party staged a number of rallies and demonstrations in support of desegregation, but this, if anything, undermined the efforts of local white leaders to effect a peaceful implementation. A group called the City-Wide Education Coalition worked to make desegregation go smoothly but this group did not have a visible, powerful leader and it was, in addition, viewed by many with suspicion that it was controlled by the Mayor for his own political purposes. Almost all of the elected white politicians were either strong anti-desegregationists or attempted to achieve invisibility. While the Catholic Church hierarchy supported desegregation, the parish priests, by and large, did not, and it was their voices that the people heard. The business community, normally a stabilizing influence in controversies such as this, played no visible role in the first year of desegregation.

The absence of a significant white pro-desegregation group implies a number of interesting consequences. The protest movement in Boston was able to control public discussion of the desegregation issue for several years because no other voice was heard. Had there been a moderately strong white pro-desegregation group, the controversy and the anti-"busing" movement might have lasted even longer. It is difficult to keep supporters mobilized when one's targets are such relatively abstract entities as the federal government, "social engineers" and rich liberals. Of course, a strong pro-desegregation group would provide too forceful an opposition. In cities where the pro- and anti-desegregation groups are of similar strengths, one might expect an even more long lasting controversy than in Boston.

The fifth influence contributing to the persistence of Boston's anti-"busing" movement was the climate of tolerance for the movement's activities which existed in the city. At the municipal level of government, there were few signs of active law enforcement during the first year of implementation. The police patrolmen's association threatened to make no arrests because, they claimed, responsibilities were inadequately delineated. Public officials frequently expressed "understanding" for white students' violent behavior toward blacks. The Mayor, at one point, said he could no longer ensure the safety of the citizenry. He disappeared a number of times during periods of tumult.

The governor was nearly invisible concerning the problems attendant to desegregating Boston's schools. He had been a strong supporter of the Racial Imbalance Act and a moral leader for liberals but had absented himself from these roles before implementation began.

Federal law enforcement agencies were also conspicuous by their near absence. Unlike in the South, in Boston there were no federal troops. In the first year of desegregation there were no federal marshals. There was no presidential leadership (even Eisenhower eventually acted on enforcement) and no visible FBI or Justice Department investigations during year one. Even Judge Garrity did not act as forcefully as he might have to ensure compliance. At one point he threatened to cite members of the School Committee for contempt of court but finally decided not to. This lack of visible moral, political or tactical support for desegregation created an environment in which it appeared that "no one" (i.e., no whites) supported "forced busing". There were very few restraints or countervailing forces. Resisters of the court order exploited this climate of tolerance for their activities and pushed it to its limits.

These five factors combined to produce a well-organized, highly articulate and powerful anti-desegregation movement. Some Northern cities that will in the future undertake court-ordered school desegregation will very likely produce similar and possibly stronger resistance movements.

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